



Legacy of “Japonisme 2018” (I): Transitioning from International Expositions to Exhibitions of Japanese Culture

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I still remember the large cultural event titled “Japonisme 2018,” which was held in France in 2018. That year marked the 160th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and France, the 150th anniversary of the Meiji Restoration, and the 150th birthday of Paul Claudel, the writer and diplomat who contributed to French-Japanese relations. Such a large-scale event themed on Japanese culture was rare in France, although anniversary events are common. It was magnificent that over fifty intriguing projects representing Japanese culture were implemented across France from July 2018 to February 2019, such as fine art, acting, movies, food, literature, dance, manga and anime (Fig. 1).



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Figure 1: Image of front cover of the booklet for “Japonisme 2018”

I was lucky to see four exhibitions related to “Japonisme 2018” when I visited Paris in December 2018. Based on the impression from my visits, I would like to discuss the acceptance of Japanese culture overseas. I am curious about the title “Japonisme 2018,” which seems to paradoxically express characteristics of the event.

The overall event was not about Japonisme, a term that refers originally to the fascination with Japanese art and culture in Western art and design in the period from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Examples of such Japonisme include works by Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh, who were inspired by ukiyo-e prints. “Japonisme 2018” might better have been titled “Japanese Art Exhibition” because it showed Japanese art, not French art influenced by Japanese art.

Later I will discuss why the exhibition was titled “Japonisme 2018” despite the contradiction. Recall similar International Exhibitions in the nineteenth century, which triggered the Japonisme trend in Europe and the United States. They were held five times in Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century: 1855, 1867, 1878, 1889 and 1900. Japan officially started to participate in 1867. The exhibits included a wide range of goods linked with Japanese lifestyle and culture, in addition to arts and crafts. Exhibitors from Japan showcased their country as well as its goods. They offered also Japanese acrobatic performances, entertainment by three geishas featuring tea service and demonstrations of daily life in a specially built teahouse (Fig. 2). At the 1878 Paris International Exposition, they even built a farmhouse in the Japanese garden of the Palais du Trocadéro (Palais de Chaillot). Participation in the International Exposition enhanced Japan’s reputation, which acquired more prestige, expanded the export industry through the attractive image of Japanese culture and increased interest.



Figure 2: Types nationaux à l'Exposition universelle - Japon, *Le Monde illustré*, le 28 septembre 1867

“Japonisme 2018” was a project for presenting overall Japanese culture in the twenty-first century, almost 150 years after the 1867 Paris International Exposition. The exhibition in 2018 was conscious of the influence of Japonisme in the second half of the nineteenth century as well as minor differences, as shown by “Japon-Japonismes: Objets inspirés, 1867–2018,” the exhibition held at Musée des Arts Décoratifs (Museum of Decorative Arts) in Paris. It uniquely included elements of Japonisme among the projects (Fig. 3).

Based on the works selected from the Japanese art collection of the Museum of Decorative Arts, the exhibition showcased porcelain, kimono, combs, sword guards, small cloths for wiping tea utensils, inkstones, bamboo baskets, chairs, prints, posters and photos. It visualized the history of exchange between Japan and France using many exhibits of decorative art from the second half of the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century. The exhibition was true to its subtitle, “les âmes en résonance” (Souls in resonance), allowing the audience to recognize anew that craftwork and decorative art served as the inexhaustible spring of Japonisme, rather than paintings and prints.

However, other exhibitions have featured Japanese art. What is the reason for the title “Japonisme 2018”? It may have expressed an expectation for the advent of a new form of Japonisme following the Japanese culture exposition, similar to the trend after the Paris Expositions. The title may imply a wish to make the dream come true again. Will Nouveau Japonisme (new Japonism) really emerge? Will other art exhibitions contribute? Time will tell. Next, I will discuss the characteristics and potential. (To be continued.)

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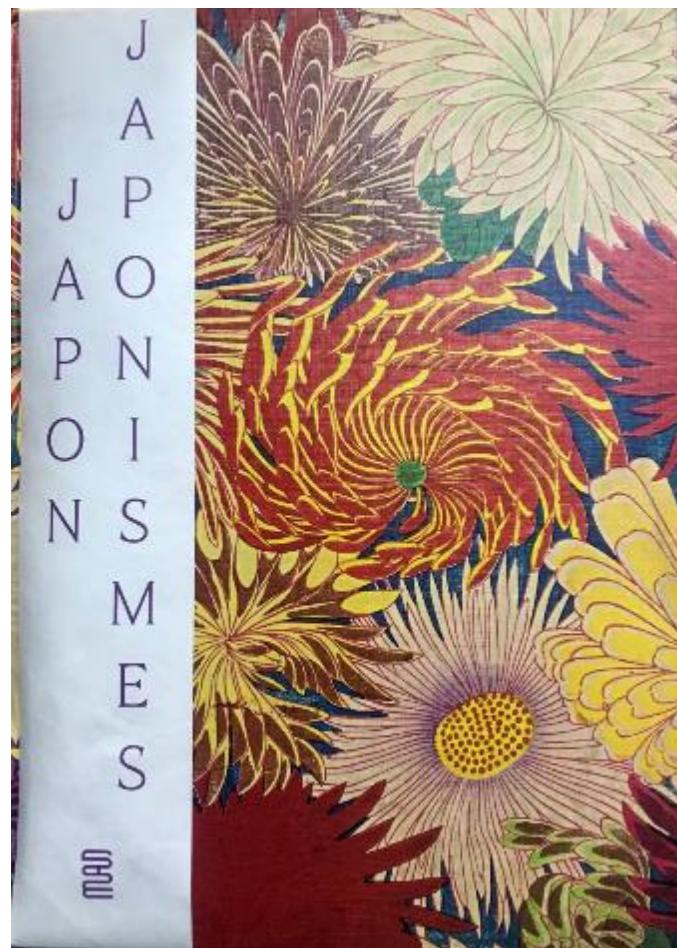


Figure 3: *Japon-Japonismes, 1867–2018*, Exh. Cat., Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, 2018

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Born in 1957. Graduated from the University of Tokyo in 1981 and earned his doctorate in Art History from the University of Paris IV (Sorbonne) in 1997. His research areas include French painting of the nineteenth century and the artistic relations between France and Japan. Served as Lecturer at the Japan Women's University (1990–93) and as Assistant Professor (1993–2006) and Professor (2006–) at the University of Tokyo. His publications include *Kindai geijutsuka no hyōsho – Manet, Fantin-Latour to jukyuseiki no furansu kaiga* (The representation of modern artists — Manet, Fantin-Latour and Western Modern Art) (2006), *Histoire de peinture entre France et Japon* (2009).